

Women playing ever-larger role in radicalisation

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News

Women should be seen less as passive bystanders in the radicalisation process, and more as both active threats and agents of change.



Photo credit: Lorna Hutchinson

Women are increasingly playing a dual role in the process of radicalisation, where they can both prevent the process from starting amongst disaffected youth, while some can become radicalised themselves.

Spanish Alde group MEP Beatriz Becerra Basterrechea said that in one respect women are an essential part in the fight against radicalisation.

“Much of the radicalisation process [of young men] takes place in networks, where mothers, sisters, wives, all play an important role. They (women) can be agents for change by preventing and stopping

the process.”

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Speaking at a press conference on women’s role in preventing radicalisation, Basterrechea said that women, often mothers, can be a determining factor in the direction which young men take, given the early age at which radicalisation often takes place.

Alexandra Gil, Spanish author of “My son the Jihadi” - a compilation of accounts by families who have experienced the radicalisation and flight of their sons or daughters to territories controlled by Islamic State - said that more had to be done to teach mothers about how to detect the early signs of radicalisation.

“Mothers - in many cases single mothers - hold first-hand information [about the activities of their children]... They are experts at the heart of the effort to combat radicalisation and have a huge contribution to make.”

To this end, Basterrechea called for more support at a European level, beyond the European Commission’s Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which works with people who have already been radicalised or who are vulnerable to radicalisation, and groups such as Mothers for Life, which is a network of parents who have experienced violent jihadist radicalisation in their own families.

“Much of the radicalisation process [of young men] takes place in networks, where mothers, sisters, wives, all play an important role. They (women) can be agents for change by preventing and stopping the process” Beatriz Becerra Basterrechea MEP

WOMEN LURED INTO TERRORISM

Carola García-Calvo, senior analyst at Spanish think tank Elcano, said that women’s role in radicalisation is not only behind the scenes, but that women are increasingly playing an active role as terrorists.

“Between 2012 and 2018, ten percent of all convictions for terrorist activities were women - this may seem like a low number, except when you take into account that between 1996 and 2012, there was not one single women convicted for terrorist offences.”

García-Calvo said that empirical data from Spain compiled by Elcano had shown that almost 90 percent of young women had begun their radicalisation process between 2012 and 2015, with 2014 and 2015 particularly “critical years”.

Although youth was a common characteristic of radicalised individuals, women who had been radicalised were on average four years younger than radicalised men, and also tended to be more

single than married, as opposed to men.

“A terrorist organisation such as Islamic State has the strategy of targeting women who are very young and unencumbered by families. These women are often experiencing identity crisis during their youth and going through rebellious periods and are looking to create their own identity.”

She explained that these young women were often from second-generation immigrant families and were essentially between two worlds: neither feeling like they belonged in their country of birth nor the country their parents had emigrated from.

“Terrorist organisations take advantage of this vulnerability in young women who are second-generation immigrants,” she added.

About the author

Lorna Hutchinson is a reporter and sub-editor at the Parliament Magazine

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